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WRESTLING WITH CHINESE

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Wrestling With Chinese

NEW missionaries in the district of Hankow are now usually sent to the Peking Language School for their first year's work in Chinese. The memory of my first day at the school is still very fresh in my mind, though I've now completed my year there. I had arrived in Peking the night before school opened, very proud of having successfully accomplished the thirty-six hours' train journey from Hankow alone. You may think there is no special reason for pride in simply staying on a train to which one has been escorted, and being met at the end of the line by kind friends, but there is, nevertheless, a distinct sense of adventure in thus starting off alone in a strange land without any knowledge of the language; hence my satisfaction when I did arrive safe and sound.

I spent that first night at the home of a friend whom I had met in Kuling a few weeks before, and next morning was taken to school by Deaconess Clark, feeling exactly as I must have felt when as a little girl I was first taken to school by my mother. But I fared better this second time, for Deaconess Clark stayed with me for the first two classes, whereas I remember quite distinctly faring forth alone to my first class in primary school.

After being introduced to the principal, Mr. Pettus, and to Mrs. Anderson, who has charge of the hostel, we entered a large room and sat down with about sixty others, all wondering, I suppose, as I was, what was going to happen and how they would set about teaching us the language of which we had heard such dreadful tales. In the very beginning, whatever ideas we may have had about school work were rudely shattered by the announcement that note-books were positively forbidden; that we must remember what we could and let the rest go!

And then the first lesson began! A Chinese teacher mounted the platform, and pointing in turn to himself, to us, and to another teacher, slowly declaimed, *wo, ni, ta.* He did this frequently till nearly all of us had grasped the idea that *wo, ni, ta* meant "I", "you", "he", though there were a few, as we learned afterwards, who had gathered that *wo* meant "nose", because of the Chinese custom of indicating the first person by pointing to the nose rather than to the chest! The names of a few simple objects such as book, paper, pencil, were then objectively introduced, and before we knew it, the period had come to an end. The rest of that day and of the remainder of the week were spent in just the same way, our part being simply to listen and train our ears to the unfamiliar sounds. We were as pleased as a child with his first reader when we were at last allowed to

repeat phrases after the teacher; and when we rose to the dignity of answering such questions as "What is this?", "What am I doing?", etc., we thought that it was just a matter of a few weeks before we should be learned Chinese scholars! We've concluded at the end of a year, however, that there are still a few things we don't know.

After about three weeks of general class work we began spending two periods a day with individual teachers, going over with them the new words and phrases that were introduced each morning in general class and conversing with them on a surprisingly large range of subjects with our very limited vocabulary. I remember boldly undertaking to tell my teacher the story of the first American Thanksgiving Day, after less than two months at school, and apparently making him understand at least the general drift of my talk.

Quite early in the term we began committing to memory, sentence by sentence, a thrilling story of an old woman in Shansi whose only son was eaten by a tiger, and who, appealing to the district magistrate, was awarded the tiger as a means of support. The story came in thirty-eight installments and extended over several months, so that we were kept in the sort of eager anticipation with which one reads a serial story in a magazine.

At last came the exciting day when we had our first reading lesson in Baller's *Mandarin Primer*, a rather impos-

ing text-book despite its unpretentious title. We thought then no further thrills awaited us, till, shortly before Christmas, we started character writing and analysis, a perfectly fascinating study; though we found, to our sorrow, that for a long time we had to learn the review characters all over again each week. They do stick after a while, however, and the weekly dictations, which commenced after Christmas, helped to fix them in our minds. At this time too we started telling stories in class each week, and we were surprised to find that we could really tell nearly any story with very slight help from the dictionary. Thus gradually and almost imperceptibly had we acquired a fair working vocabulary.

And we used what we learned from the very first. Nothing daunted by such mistakes as gravely declaiming in the market the phrase for "one pencil" when we meant "how much money?" or telling the laundryman to be careful in washing a new dress because it had not yet been "baptized" we went bravely about the city, practicing Chinese on every one we met. We who lived in the hostel were especially fortunate in having servants who spoke no English, so that we had to give our orders in Chinese or go without things. Moreover we soon made friends with several of the young women teachers in the school, and through them met other Chinese girls, so here was another opportunity for practicing the language

and one of which we took advantage to the utmost, though we did prize the friendship of the girls for itself as well, and were surprised to find how much alike we all were after all.

Now at the end of our first year we feel that we've made a good start and can go back to our stations and to our untrained teachers with some knowledge of the way to go about our studying. The year at language school has been a most easy and carefree one, but we have accomplished a great deal in our education in things Chinese as well as in the language itself. We have had courses of lectures in Chinese history and geography, and seminars on various aspects of Chinese life and thought, as well as all sorts of interesting trips to the many famous sights in and about Peking. I would like to tell about some of our sightseeing excursions, but if I did this paper would never end!

I must not neglect, however, to speak of one other factor in our Chinese education, and that is attendance at Chinese Church services. After three or four months at school we found we could get some idea of what the sermon was about; and it really was not at all difficult to follow the service in our Chinese Prayer Books, though of course we could take no oral part in it at first. We were tremendously pleased with ourselves when we knew enough characters to attempt singing some of the hymns, and we flattered ourselves that by singing quite emphatically the few

characters we did know and making non-committal noises of one sort or another for the unfamiliar ones, we were making our neighbors believe we were really singing the hymns!

The point I want to make in closing is that Chinese is not nearly so black as it's been painted, that persons of ordinary intelligence can learn Chinese without undue effort and that it is really lots of fun!

The Peking Language School is less than ten years old. It represents a great forward step in helping the new missionary to acquire a speaking and reading knowledge of an immensely difficult language. Other Language Schools are maintained at Nanking and Soochow. The Peking and Nanking Schools teach the Mandarin dialect and are therefore attended by missionaries from Central and Southern China. The Soochow School teaches the Wu dialects and therefore provides for missionaries from the Shanghai region.

It costs about $200 a year to put a missionary through the Language School. Anyone desirous of providing this amount in order that a missionary may be qualified for work, can secure particulars from the Department of Missions, 281 Fourth Avenue, New York City.

Copies of this leaflet may be obtained from the Educational Division, Church Missions House, 281 Fourth Avenue, New York, by asking for No. 212.

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